

“Do We All Worship the Same God?”
Genesis 1: 1-5/ Luke 9: 46-50
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In the last few years I’ve had **several** people--in fact, highly **intelligent** and deeply committed “**Christian** people”--who have “**asked** me” (point-blank): “Do we all worship the same God?” **Consequently**, I have--for at least a “couple of **years**,” now--I’ve been **thinking**: I should “do a sermon” in response **to** “this question.” Which--as you may have **noticed**, from “the title” **of** “today’s sermon”--that **is** “what I’m doing” **today**.

The “context” **of** “this question”--on the part of those who have “**asked** it”--it has “**come** from” instances **such as**, for example: when “the President of the Southern Baptist Convention” (several **years** ago); when he declared, “God **doesn’t** hear the prayers of **Jews**.” Or **more recently**, as so many “**American** Christians,” at least, have become increasingly “**aware** of”--if not just as “**anxious** toward”--the “religion of **Islam**.”

As for “my answer” **to** “the question”--“Do we all worship the same God?”--it **was**, **has** been, and **continues** to be the “**same** answer”: “Yes” **and** “No.” Which, of course, requires some “explaining.” So here goes.

The ancient “**Eastern** religions” of “Hinduism” and “Buddhism,” for instance--**they** are what are called “**poly**-theistic” religions: involving the “worship” of many **different** “gods” and “goddesses.” And, **frankly**, “Buddhism”--which “grows **out** of” **Hinduism**--“Buddhism” is **actually** more of a “philosophy” than a “religion.” If you’ve been “paying **attention**,” however, to the increased “religious **pluralism**”--here in America, over “several **decades**,” now--you’re likely **aware of** the growing “interest” **in** and the “influence” **of** the “**poly**-theistic **Eastern** religions,” here in **our** “part of the world.”

“**Poly**-theism” is, of course, “quite **different**” from “**mono**-theism”: the “worship” of “**one** God.” In **fact**, at least **some** “Jews” **and** “Muslims” would accuse us “Christians” of **being** “poly-theists.” Since “**we** worship **one** God” in “three **persons**” (or more **precisely**: “three person-**as**”): the “God **revealed** to us” in our “**Christian Bible**,” at least, as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Let me “pause,” here--**parenthetically**--to offer a “brief explanation” of something **important**. For us “**mono**-theists”--Jews, Christians, and Muslims--“**worshipping** God” and “believing **in** God”: they’re the **same thing**. In **other words**--in “the Bible” **and** in “the Quran”--“believing” is **not** an “abstraction”; it is **not** mere “intellectual **assent**”; something **any** of us **can**, in fact, “stand **apart** from” (or “**outside** of”) and simply “**speculate** on,” or even “acknowledge” as “right” or “true” or “good.”

Rather--in “the **Bible**,” at least--“believing” and “worshipping” are something you “do.” They are “verbs.” **Just as**--in “the Bible”--**God** is a “verb.” Whether in **Genesis 12**, where God “tells” **Abram** to “go” to a place God will “show” him (those are

all “verbs”--to “tell,” to “go,” to show”). Or **Jesus** (in **Matthew 16**)--calling **us**, as “**Christian Disciples**”--with such “verbs” as “deny, take, and follow” (as in “**deny** yourself, **take up your cross**, and **follow me**”).

“Do We All Worship the Same God?”--“Yes”--and “No.”

Christianity “grows out of” **Judaism**. Jesus wasn’t “a **Christian**”; he was, rather, “a **Jew**.” Our “**Christian New Testament**” is a “witness” (and a “**faithful one**,” at that, on the part of both “**Jewish**” and “**Gentile Christians**”)--a “witness” to Jesus as “the promised **Messiah** (the **Christ**, if you will) of Israel.” Jesus’ **Bible**, however--it was “our **Christian Old Testament**” (the “**Hebrew scriptures**”)--in which is “revealed” **Israel’s God**, to whom Jesus “prayed.” And “**God doesn’t hear the prayers of Jews**”?

The “religion of **Islam**”--found in the **Quaran**--was “revealed” to **Mohammed**, in **Saudi Arabia**, “700 years” after “the birth of **Christianity**” (“our faith” being “born” when Jesus was “resurrected”). And, eventhough, Jesus **isn’t**--to **Muslims**--“who he is” to **us**, as **Christians** (the “**Christ**,” **Israel’s** “promised **Messiah**,” the “**Son of God**,” our **Savior** and **Lord**); to **Muslims**, however, Jesus **is** “revered” as “the **last**” of the “**Hebrew prophets**” (in “the tradition” of, for example, Moses and Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah); and--for us, “as **Christians**”--even “**John the Baptist**”).

That is, at least, **part** of my “**Yes answer**” to “the question”: “Do We All Worship the Same God?” At least **us** “**mono-theists**”--**Jews**, **Christians**, and **Muslims**.

The “**No part**” of “my answer” comes, of course, from our uniquely **Christian** “distinctive”--a “conviction **not shared**” by **Jews or Muslims**. What “we **Christians**” call “the **Incarnation**.” Which is **not** the “**deity of Christ**”--as you often “hear it **said**”--that “a **man** became **God**.” But **rather**--the “**humanity of God**”--that “**God** became a **person**.”

As in, for example, “the **Prologue**” to “the Gospel of **John** (which **declares**): “And the Word became **flesh** and dwelt **among us**--full of **grace** and **truth**.” Or the “first chapter of **Colossians**” (where “**Paul** writes”): “In **him** (Jesus) the **fulness of God** was **pleased to dwell**.”

The “purpose of which” **was** (and **is**) **why** God “created” and “sustained” **Israel**. That “**all the world**” (in **Christ**; the “fulfillment of **Israel**; that is, at least, how we **Christians** “read the Bible”); that “**all the world** might be **saved**.” Again--as “**Paul** writes” (in **II Corinthians 5**)--“For God was **in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self**.” Or as **Athanasius** (a 4th century “church **father**”); as **he** put it: “In **Christ**, **God** became **one** with **us**, that **we** might become **one** with **God**.”

I’ve “said it to you” **often**. As “**Christians**”--the “most and best” **we** “know” of “who **God** is”--**we** “see” in “the face of **Jesus**” (in his “person” and “work”; in our Lord’s “teaching” and “life,” his “death” and “resurrection”).

“Do We All Worship the Same God?”

Both of our “**scripture** lessons” today are “insightful,” I think, when it comes to “**answering** this question.” As in that “**first sentence**” in “the **Bible**” (**Genesis 1: 1**). “In the beginning **God**,” it says. As “Christians,” at least, “**we** believe” that “**God is**.” That’s how **Chandler Gonzales** “said it,” recently, in our “Lenten **Bible** Study.” In **fact**, how “the **Bible** says it.”

What this **means**, of course, is that God **isn’t** “a being,” but rather “Being **itself**.” In **other** words, in “the **Bible**,” at least--God is a “premise”--**not** a “conclusion” (or **better**, perhaps, the “premise” **and** the “conclusion”; the “beginning” **and** “the end,” the Bible says; “Alpha” **and** “Omega”; “all and **in** all”). Which means that you can’t “**prove** God,” in the way you can “prove” anything **else**. It is, rather, “God” **in** which, **by** which, and **out of** which “everything “**is** “proven” (**except** God). Since everything **else** “exists”--but **not** God. God **doesn’t** “exist”--at least in “the Bible”--in “the way,” at least, every-**one** and every-**thing else** “exists.” Rather--in “the **Bible**”--God **is**. In **fact**, as “Christians,” **we** even “believe” that if God **isn’t**--“nothing **else** is.”

If this sounds “too **complicated**” (too “abstract,” too “intellectual”) for “the **rest** of us” (who **aren’t**, like **Chandler Gonzales**, “a prodigious **6th**-grader), this is **precisely** “the reasoning” **Paul** uses--in the most “**practical** of ways”--in the **8th** chapter of “his **letter**, I **Corinthians**.” The “problem” being one of “worshipping **idols**” (some-“one,” or some-“thing” **other than** God), where **Paul** **writes**: “We know that an **idol** has **no** **existence**, and there is **no** **God** but **one**. For although there **may be** so-called gods in heaven or on earth,” he continues--“as **indeed** there are **many** **gods** and **many** **lords**--yet, **for us**,” **Paul** declares, “there is **one** **God**, the **Father**, **from** whom are **all** things and **for** whom **we** **exist**; and **one** **Lord**, **Jesus**, the **Christ**, **thru** whom are **all** things and **thru** whom **we** **exist**.”

Put **simply**--as **Paul** “answers the question”; indeed, the “reasoning” of “a **Christian**”--we either “**all** worship the **same** **God**,” or **no one** is “worshipping **any** **God**. Because “there **is** **no other** **God**” (at least when you “read the Bible”).

In our “**Gospel** lesson” today, **Jesus** offers an even **more** “practical answer” to “this question”: “Do we all worship the same God?” The “Disciple” **speaking** (in “this account”)--**John**--the brother of **James** (and if you’ve ever “read **the Gospels**” in “the New Testament, you know that “**these** guys,” these “brothers,” **James** and **John**; how **they**--not **unlike** “some folk you and **I** know” all **too well**--how they are “given” to “letting the clutch out on their **tongue**, before their **brain** is in gear”); indeed, it is **John** who “reports **to** **Jesus**” that there is a fellow who is “casting out **demons**” in “**Jesus**’ name,” no less.

“But he’s **not** one of **us**,” **John** exclaims. And our Lord replies: “Do not forbid him; for he that is **not against** you is **for** you.”

When it comes to “**Christian** faith,” at least--what is so “apparent” (at least, when

you “read **the Bible**”)--is that **Jesus** is **far more** “liberal” (or, if you **prefer**, “generous”; or perhaps “understanding) when it comes to “who is **in**” and “who is **out**” (if you will, who **does**, and who **doesn’t** “worship” the “same **God**”), than are “too many of **us**,” I’m afraid, who are like “the Disciple, **John**,” here in **Luke 9**. Those of us who “think **we** know more about God” than even “**Jesus** does.”

Which, of course, comes **not** from how “secure” we are (**in** “our faith”)--but **tragically**--how “**in**-secure.” Not **un**-like “**these** Disciples,” as (once again) we “**encounter** them” in “**this** lesson,” where “**the Bible** says”: “And an **argument** arose **among** them as to **which** of them was the **greatest**.”

Anytime **anyone** is “fighting” (or even “arguing,” **pejoratively**)--“**between** religions”--or even **within** a “**particular** religion,” it is (un-**fortunate**-ly) “**more** reflective” of mere “insecure speculation” (or so it would **seem**) than the “kind of **commitment**” the **Bible** (with all its “verbs” for “faith,” for “**believing** in”); indeed, the “**depth** of commitment” the **Bible** calls “worship.” Since “**most** of us,” I suspect: we **likely have** quite **enough** to “tend to” in our “**own** relationship with God,” **than with** (like **John**, as “**Luke** tells **this** story”) being “**too** ready” to “judge” **anyone else’s** “relationship.” That **is**, at least, what **Jesus** “seems to be saying,” here in **this** “Gospel lesson.”

It’s not “easy”--living in “both/**and**” ways--rather than “dividing **life** (even **God**) **up**” so **neatly**, into such simplistic “either/or, good/bad, right/**wrong**” categories. That “**seems** to be,” at least, what “**John** is doing” (in “**this** Bible story”). In **other words**, if “this guy isn’t **with** us,” that must **then mean**, therefore, that “he’s “**against** us.” **Jesus**, however--**he** appears to “see the situation” in a “very **different** way” (indeed, a “both/**and**” way); that “**not** being **for**” **doesn’t**, necessarily, mean “being **against**.”

Agreed: this is **hardly** the “**easiest** way of thinking”--much **less**, “living” (this “both/**and**” way). But then, who would “**expect** it to be.” **Afterall**--whoever “said it was “**easy**--following **Jesus**” (?).

That **is**, however, why “my **answer**” to “the **question**”--“Do we all worship the same God?”--why it is **both** “Yes” **and** “No.”

“**My** religion” is “**better** than yours”? “**My** religion” is “**superior** to yours”? If **mine** is “right,” **yours** must be “wrong”?

“Do we all worship the same God?” **Think** about it. The “answer” in **Genesis 1** (the “first sentence” in “the **Bible**”) ? The “answer” **Paul** gives (in **I Corinthians 8**) ? The “answer” **Jesus** gives (in **Luke 9**) ? The “answer” **Chandler Gonzales** would give?